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Archeology and Labor History

The new Labor History tells stories of working people in their homes and communities in addition to the traditional focus on the picket line. Archeology searches the remains of workers' material life. Labor Archeology pieces together the details of archival and archeological resources into a tangible historical tapestry that both illuminates workers' lives and improves archeological methodology for interpreting 19th- and 20th-century remains. When the National Park Service undertook a National Historic Landmark (NHL) theme study on American labor history beginning in 1991, archeology was not specifically included. In an unrelated occurrence, the Society for American Archaeology's NHL Committee recommended two appropriate topics for NHL archeology studies. The first is the Earliest Americans Theme Study, currently underway. The second would be the development of industry. This essay is a brief introduction to the earliest stages of that second theme study, which may also be thought of as the archeological component of the labor history theme study. The choice of examples does not imply that these properties will be nominated as NHLs.

Though perhaps not the precise solution Herbert Gutman intended when he wrote of a need to understand the "mind" of the worker over the history and behavior of labor movements[1], archeology is a way to understand the reality of workers' lives by studying the material remains of their homes and communities. Analyzing remains of workers' communities offers information on the social, economic, ethnic, gender, and political aspects of the daily lives of workers and their families. The presence of certain types of remains often characterizes workers' communities. These types include, but are not limited to, industrial structures such as factories, mines, and mills; workers' housing; commercial institutions such as company stores, bars, and clubs; and infrastructural features such as sewer and water systems, roads, canals, and railroads.

While archeologists may investigate each type of site separately, it is only when we view the communities as a whole that we obtain a clear understanding of workers' minds and daily lives. An archeological analysis of labor history involves many research issues. The two general types of issues described below are umbrellas for more specific research questions.

The first general issue is ethnic, class, and gender divisions and conflicts in workers' communities. Construction methods, architectural styles, and community layout are clues to the ethnic, class, and sometimes gender segregation of workers' communities. In the archeological record, style or type of artifact may indicate ethnic heritage or other characteristics. Examples include the predominance of imported Asian goods at a Chinese mining camp or the personal toiletry possessions of a Lowell mill girl. Archeologists can study conflicts between ethnic groups and classes by analyzing the physical evidence of interactions between different groups, by studying such items as trade goods or cultural assimilation as evidenced by the material record. Archeologists can also relate more specific research questions in this area to individual sites, such as how Chinese miners at the Moore Gulch Chinese Mining adapted to the prevailing culture and work methods in Idaho during the 1800s.

The Sunrise City Historic District, on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska, provides another National Register example of how the material remains of a workers' community may illustrate ethnic, class, and gender distinctions. This district contains the remains of a late-19th century mining camp that became the supply center for mining in the Sixmile Creek area. The archeological and architectural remains include building ruins, foundations, root cellars, depressions, artifact scatters, isolated artifacts, mining features, the remains of a tram line, and a cemetery. Recently, researchers have begun studying the lives of women in frontier communities, working against the assumption that these communities were strictly male. The presence of female oriented items in the archeological record of Sunrise City can verify the presence of women in mining communities. Excavations at this workers' community also have the potential to reveal information on issues such as how domestic households were organized, the consumption habits of a frontier mining community, and ethnic and gender relations within the community.

A second general issue is the effect of labor and industry on workers' and their families' lives inside and outside the workplace. Changes in labor practices following industrialization affected workers' lives on many levels. Within a mid-19th century workplace, for example, the absence of personal belongings, liquor bottles, or tobacco related products may reflect the institution of new company policies and the modern work ethic. The absence of work-related items in workers' domestic areas also supports increasing separation of paid work from the home. In boarding houses in Lowell National Historical Park, the archeological record provides evidence of company policies on personal

behavior in public and the structure of free time[2]. Archeologists can research this aspect by studying the evidence of discouraged worker behavior, such as alcohol consumption as evidenced by the presence of liquor bottles in the material record.

More specific research questions under this heading include how workers responded to new company policies and the modern work ethic in their consumption habits, how workers' families adapted to the separation of work from the home, and how company policies affected workers' free time and social lives. An example on the National Register that may illustrate this issue is the Mill Creek Historic District in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. This district includes at least seven 18th- to 19th-century milling communities with their associated mills, mill workers' housing, mill owners' housing, and managers' housing. These structures are present today as archeological and architectural ruins. This district is also noteworthy for its connection to industrial and technological changes over time. The introduction of technological advancements to the mills affected the methods, efficiency, and employment of the mill workers. Archeological remains in the workers' communities suggest economic, social, and technological changes within the workers' homes that mirror the changes in labor practices and industry development.

The Hells Canyon Archeological District, which runs along the Snake River in Idaho and Oregon, is another National Register example of industry impact on workers' lives. This district contains a large number of historic period mining, ranching, and agricultural related remains. Archeological and architectural remains from many small-to-mid-sized mining operations and their associated labor communities illustrate the settlement of this part of the Pacific West and the development of mining technology. These remains also illustrate how industrial development, economic challenges, and eventual industrial abandonment of Hells Canyon impacted miners' daily lives and living conditions.

These two general sets of issues are by no means the only topics available for research at workers' communities, but they serve to illustrate the value of archeological analysis of workers' communities to labor history. Historical documentation provides data on labor history, on the history of certain towns, and on technological and socio-economic developments. Archeology supplements and can verify these accounts by providing specific material information on daily conditions, consumer choices, and laborers' behavior.

Archeologists, anthropologists, and historians each study some aspects of labor history. Industrial archeologists study the architectural features and development of small-to-large-scale industrial operations. Anthropologists of work study the social, economic, and cultural impacts of labor on the lives of workers and their families. Some archeologists have looked at the material remains of labor sites and studied the impact of labor operations on the spatial organization and culture of labor communities. Others have begun to broaden their approaches to studying workers' communities. For example, Donald Hardesty[3] has created a typology of mining sites in the Pacific West, while Paul Shackel[4] has used archeology to study changing attitudes and behavior of workers in 19th-century Harpers Ferry as factory discipline replaced craft methods.

The number of sites on the National Register with significance for labor archeology suggests the wealth of material for further research. Revisiting previously excavated industrial sites with attention to labor issues may contribute insights to labor history. With anthropological, historical, and sociological issues in mind to help establish the historic context, archeologists can plan future research designs with greater attention to the development of industry and workers' communities.

Our work on potential archeology NHLs related to the labor history theme study has just begun. We would be very glad to receive information and suggestions about appropriate archeological properties. Please contact Barbara Little at NPS, Cultural Resources, Suite 400; 1949 C St., NW; Washington, DC 20240; email <barbara_little@nps.gov>.

Notes

1 Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1976), 79.

2 See Mary Beaudry and Stephen Mrozowski, *Interdisciplinary Investigations of the Boott Mills Lowell, Massachusetts: Volume III, The Boarding House System as a Way of Life* (Center for Archeological Studies: Boston, 1989).

3 Donald Hardesty, et al., *Riepetown Data Recovery Plan, Robinson Mine Project, White Pine County, Nevada* (Western Cultural Resources Management, Inc.: Sparks, 1992).

4 Paul Shackel, *Culture Change and the New Technology: an Archeology of the Early American Industrial Era* (Plenum Press: New York, 1996).

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